

Book review

Prostitution considered in its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspect. By WILLIAM ACTON. 1972. A new impression of the second edition of 1870. Pp. 302. Frank Cass, London. (£4.50)

Doctor William Acton (1814–75) learnt his medicine at St. Bartholomew's Hospital, London. His specialist training in venereology he received in Paris from Philippe Ricord over a period of 5 years. On his return to London in 1840, Acton worked at the Islington Dispensary and also built up a fashionable West End practice. In the best Victorian tradition he was a tireless and thorough worker. He wrote many articles on venereal diseases and their related problems. Illegitimacy, prostitution, child murder, and wet-nursing received particular attention.

The second edition of this book on prostitution, now re-issued, which followed the first after an interval of 13 years, forms one of a current series entitled the Cass Library of Victorian Times.

Acton attacks rather than supports the sexual mores of his time. He is at pains to draw attention to the need for a humane, rational and, as he sees it, a practical compassion for all victims of a social problem which he says is rooted in poverty and in ignorance.

His views are based on demographic data culled from his own carefully documented experience, the research of others at home and abroad, and no less from official sources. He presents his statistics with forthright zeal as incontestable evidence to prove this.

Venereal diseases he sees as a direct result of unbridled prostitution. This is the active villain; he

abhors it, as he does its root causes and its results.

He believed the incidence of disease to be controllable and the essential mechanism the overt recognition of prostitution. 'Prostitution admits of legislation'. He would extend the provisions of the Contagious Diseases Acts, which he sees as a successful means of imparting health, both physical and moral, to army, navy, and prostitute alike, to the civil population. In other words he calls for abandoning the English voluntary system in preference to the Continental licensing system. The resulting interference with personal liberty he views as a necessity. Only thus, he asserts, can men and women be saved from the evils of their environment. He admits that this view of the need for regulation departs from the opinions of his friends and colleagues.

His insistence on the recognition of prostitution as a social fact leads him to call not only for regulation but also for the prevention and amelioration of the evil. Prevention he sees as only possible through general social betterment. As for amelioration, he hopes 'to cleanse the moral nature of the sick prostitute'.

Acton was among the first to point out that many prostitutes marry and eventually settle to a regular family life. Thus he did not despair entirely. His call for facing the whole issue, discussing it, and taking action must have proved strong meat for his contemporaries and times. The flavour of Dr. Acton's commitment is generally refreshing. The book is essential reading for all who would understand the tradition of prostitution past and present.

R. S. Morton